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Fostering Learners' Autonomy in Writing

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Abstract

In studying English as Second Language (ESL), learners' autonomy is needed. As we know, learner autonomy has been claimed to be an ultimate goal of education for a long time and has been identified as a complicated capacity that potentially has a great impact on personal growth and achievement. The autonomy positively affects language learning and it is no doubt that learners' autonomy is a prerequisite for effective language learning. This qualitative research aimed to describe the strategies to foster learners' autonomy in writing class. Participants consisted of students at Bina Nusantara University. Qualitative research was conducted because the researcher wanted to understand the context or setting in which the participants of the study addressed an issue connected with the strategies to promote the learners' autonomy in writing. The result showed that there were two strategies that foster learners' autonomy in writing class that covered the uses of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and student-centered approach.

Keywords: learners' autonomy, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), writing, student-centered approach

A. Introduction

Whenever In recent highly technological society, the English language is evolving. People's mobility and dynamics amid today's flow of information and technological modernization, the teachers' roles, therefore, are needed to prepare learners for success in the 21st century. Creating a dynamic classroom that offers the learners opportunities to build and develop their imagination and creativity is essential by the use of technology, particularly the Internet and other digital tools.

Actually Bina Nusantara (Binus) University as one of the universities in Indonesia has a motto "Building-up the nation's future by science and technology". In accordance with this motto, Binus University consistently strives to improve the quality of graduates by continuously applying the development of information technology in the curriculum and subject syllabuses without ignoring the conditions outlined by the government. In order to equip the graduates'

excellent competencies to compete in today's Asian Economic Community (AEC), English becomes one of requisite subjects taken by all students.

One of them, English for Written Business Communication, was taught for intermediate students with a minimum PBT TOEFL of 500 that aims to achieve Business English written communication skills at the minimum intermediate level. This course, in addition, consists of both written and oral demonstration of producing and presenting business documents. English for Written Communication (EWBC) is under the approach of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Here, the students learnt English for business based on the major they are enrolling at present, specifically International Business and Management Program. They eventually took this course for two hours per week in their even semester for academic year 2015/2016.

In studying English, of course, building and developing students' autonomy is significant. Dickinson (1987:11) illustrated autonomy as the condition in which the learner is completely responsible for all the decisions connected with his learning and the implementation of those decisions (Benson, 2007). However, when discussing about learners' autonomy in writing is not as easy as it sounds. As a matter of fact, in second language learning what happens to English language students is that most of them generally are not willing to take responsibility for their own learning process, especially in writing. Instead, they will find writing as productive skill hard and give up easily even the learning process itself has not been started yet. That is why the researcher thinks it is an urgency to bring up students' autonomy in writing class. Therefore, the strategies to foster students' autonomy are crucial. Therefore, this research aims to describe the strategies to foster the Binus students' autonomy in this writing class.

B. Literature review

1. Learners' autonomy

In Gai (2015), Holec (1981:3) defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning." Moreover, taking full responsibilities means one can manage his/her own learning from the following five aspects: (1) determining objectives, (2) defining content and progressions, (3) selecting methods and techniques to be used, (4) monitoring procedure of acquisition, and (5) evaluating what has happened. Therefore, learners who can really manage their own learning or accomplish the above learning cycle are regarded as autonomous learners.

According to Benson (2001: 7) in Liu (2015) autonomy is regarded as the capacity to "take control of one's own learning". Until now, there are some reasons why autonomous learning plays significant role in the process of learning. First, assisting students to become more effective and independent learners it is an educational goal for teachers (Smith, 2008). Second, language education is shifting toward a learner-centered approach (Benson, 2001; Ciekanski, 2007; Egel, 2009; Sakai, Takagi, & Chu, 2010; Sims, 2012; Ushioda, 1996), particularly when there is easy access to multimedia resources to help learners learn independently outside the classroom. Third, autonomy is considered a fundamental human need that can enhance learners' intrinsic motivation (Little, 1989, 2007; Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002).

According to Schwienhorst (2012: 9), learner autonomy is a pedagogical concept that denotes a capacity of the learner. First, learners need to become somewhat detached from their own learning. They need to develop linguistic and metalinguistic awareness and to be able critically reflect on their own position as learners. In addition, learners need to become experimenters with and explorers of language and language learning in a laboratory-like, stress-free environment. They need to understand that they themselves need to take control of and assume responsibility for their learning. They need to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own process of language learning. In summary, this involves experimentation. These approaches to learner autonomy have also important implications for the role of the teacher, not just the learner.

Writing allows "experience to be recorded in a permanent form and so communicated form and so communicated to others who are removed in time and space. It also provides a means for reflecting upon experience, for working out ideas and feelings away from the pressure of face-to-face communication (Wells, 1981a: 1 cited by Schwienhorst, 2012: 9). Schwienhorst, then, points out that writing is a process helps learners 'think'. Here, learners can more easily plan, monitor, and evaluate what they are doing and organize their thoughts. On the other hand, the finished product of writing becomes something external we can analyze, manipulate, re-use, research, and edit, in a variety of ways. It can be summarized, therefore, that written texts serve an interface between two kinds of awareness.

On the one hand, written texts are a resource that can be drawn on when speaking, so that they support communicative use of the spoken language and thus the development of language awareness in the psycholinguistic sense; and on the other, they provide a focus for the development, via analysis and evaluation, of language awareness as knowledge about the target language. (Little, 1997a:102).

Rather than just serving as a tool for conveying information, written text can be thought of as a cognitive tool, a key resource by which we effectively redescribe our own thoughts in a format which makes them available for a variety of new operations and manipulations. It is not surprising that writing plays a major part in pedagogical implementations of learner autonomy principles.

As cited by Schwienhorst, in Dam's (1990) view collaboration is the mode of interaction most apt to promote learner autonomy. Group work and collaboration, in this respect, facilitate the move towards learner-centeredness. In the classroom, the students work in groups, deciding on content and structuring it. After group work, learners compare notes, evaluating what goes well or not so well in the session, what they want to improve, and how they want to proceed. At the end of each session, groups will share more general problems and issues that have arisen in group work.

2. Second Language Writing

Fostering learners' autonomy is required when they do literacy learning. Actually, in early 21st century, what actually becomes a dominant emphasis is adolescent literacy learning in Western countries, particularly the United States. The reason is partly as an outgrowth of widely-publicized efforts to increase reading achievement in early grades. As a matter of fact, it is not amazing to see the policy makers, researchers, and educational leaders at present are turning their attention to the specific needs of adolescent literacy learners. After that, English language education is the primary content area for supporting adolescent literacy growth. Of course, it is not just about reading and literature but also writing.

In the 1980s there was the development of content-based instruction that focuses on authentic content. This approach is still important in the teaching of academic writing today. The objectives in content-based courses are drawn from the language, content, and study skills needed in a particular academic context (Brian, 2004: 5). Content-based writing courses are theme-based, focusing on particular content, topics, and language items in relation to particular themes. Approaches that have been made popular in first language settings are often drawn into English as Second Language (ESL) content-based courses. These include cooperative learning, whole language learning, literature-based teaching, task-based learning, case studies, and learners teaching the class about the own culture.

According to Sokolik in Nunan (2003: 88), up until the early twentieth century, there is still rigid set of assumptions in writing. Good writing is accomplished from a set of rules and principles, the teacher's responsibility to relate the writing to those rules and principles, students' responses to selected written texts by following the rules of good writing. After that, every student essay is graded for its grammatical accuracy and correct organization as well as its content.

Moreover, teaching writing is actually not an easy task for teachers. Richards & Renandya (2002) mention that writing skills are often viewed as the most difficult language skill to master. The difficulty lies in generating and organizing ideas and translating the ideas into a comprehensible text. This is not automatically learned from 'ordinary' writing stages. However, the skill can be learned; it can be trained, and with careful planning and implementation, the optimum learning result of this skill, together with learning other aspects of writing, can be successfully achieved.

On the other hand, for students, difficulty to write in English also happens. In language learning, writing is considered as one of the productive skills that cover many aspects of language. It initially requires learners' knowledge of language use and knowledge of content. Undeniably, writing is used as a way of communicating messages for a purpose similar to other language skills. In line with that, Byrne (1990) states that writing is the expression of ideas in a consecutive way which is ultimately aimed to be able to express the utilization of a special vocabulary and certain refinement of a structure. To be able to write needs practices in expressing systematic ideas, incorporating learners' prior experiences, and utilizing learners' understanding of vocabulary and grammar.

According to Richards and Renandya (2002: 316), writing has to go through several

processes, involving planning (pre-writing), drafting, revising, and editing and three other stages, namely responding (sharing), evaluating, and post-writing. Planning (pre-writing) is any activity in the classroom that encourages students to write. Drafting focuses on the fluency of writing and are not preoccupied with grammatical accuracy or the neatness of the draft. When students revise, they review their texts on the basis of the feedback given in the responding stage. They reexamine what was written to see how effectively they have communicated their meanings to the reader. At editing stage, students are engaged in tidying up their texts as they prepare the final draft for evaluation by the teacher. Responding to student writing by the teacher has a central role to play in the successful implementation of process writing. Then, in evaluating student writing, the scoring may be analytical or holistic. In order to be effective, the criteria for evaluation should be made known to students in advance. Post-writing constitutes any classroom activity that the teacher and students can do with the completed pieces of writing. This includes publishing, sharing, reading aloud, and transforming texts for stage performances. The post-writing stage is a platform for recognizing students' work as important and worthwhile.

3. *Strategies to Promote Autonomy*

As mentioned by Schwienhorst (2008: 11) that learner autonomy "highlights learner-centered approach to learning, where learners are stimulated to critically reflect on their learning process and develop a personally meaningful relation to it", therefore, one of the widespread and prevailing methods is applying computer and the Internet in the classroom setting. It is regarded that computers have the potential to help students to be more autonomous in learning (Schwienhorst, 2002). Computer-mediated communication has been acknowledged as the most widely used learning environment by learners, as it provides opportunity to extend their interaction and learning beyond the limitation of place and time (McAnear, 2002).

Recently, we observe increasing number of people connecting to the Internet for a variety of purposes. Some of these Internet users are learners who seek for the information on their own choice of time, place and type of materials. These flexibility in choosing the time, place and materials is believed to lead learners to autonomy in learning. Moreover, the ideal learning atmosphere for digital learners is a rich learning environment that allows and supports learners to gain knowledge collaboratively and independently, disregarding their ideal learning styles (Maesin, Mansor, Shafie, & Nayan, 2009).

According to Chapelle (2001), online language learners have laid-back access to supportive tools such as: online dictionaries, word processors, and the Internet information; consequently they develop interdependency of the teacher and are persuaded to manage their own learning to a certain extent. Moreover, Tschirhart & Rigler (2009) also believe that Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has significant role in promoting learner autonomy. They further emphasized the importance of appropriate learning materials and creating the suitable learning environment in CALL context where learners can communicate and interact with other learners of the target language.

The purpose of education in student-centered approach is to assist the students' learn what is useful in their life and to develop the individuals' ability to learn independently, to enjoy learning and continue to learn throughout life (Margaret, 1988). Therefore, in order to produce independent, competent and practice-oriented graduates employing student-centered approach of teaching is essential. The student-centered method is based on the fact that students who are given the freedom to explore areas based on their personal interests, and who are accompanied in their striving for solutions by a supportive understanding facilitator, not only achieve high academic results but also experience and increase in personal values, such as flexibility, self confidence, social skills and problem solving capacity.

C. *Methodology*

1. *Research Design*

This research used qualitative method. According to Creswell (2007: 37), qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problem inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. It was a descriptive study. It means the data collected take the form of words rather than numbers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The goal of the research was to describe the strategies to foster learner autonomy in writing class.

2. *Participants (Population and Sample)*

The researcher used the concept of purposeful sampling that the individuals and the site for study were selected. By doing this, they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007: 125). The participants consisted of 58 students of Bina Nusantara University who enrolled in writing class, especially English for Written Business Communication course, in even semester for academic year 2015/2016. They are specifically from International Business and Management Program.

3. *Technique of Data Collection*

The data was collected through observation, collecting personal students' documents, and doing non-structured questionnaires to the participants. Here, the researcher automatically played roles as both participant and observer in the classroom. Observation was used to get data about learner activities in writing class. Audio-visual was included as well. The collected data like students' writing papers and projects were also collected.

4. *Instruments*

a. Audiovisual material

In this research, audio recording was used when the students presented in the front of the class. Visual materials were covered as well as Binus University facilitated the students with online materials that can be accessed anytime and anywhere. Audiovisual materials consist of images or sounds that researchers collect to help them understand the central phenomenon under study. In qualitative research, sound or visual materials can become sources of information for qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

b. Questionnaires

Non-structured questionnaires were distributed to the participants of the research on their perception of the EWBC course whether it had assisted them to build and develop their autonomy toward the course itself. The questionnaires were the combination of open-ended and closed-questions aimed to investigate and explore deep answers on students' perception toward the writing course they were enrolling.

c. Field note

Field notes are text (words) recorded by the researcher during an observation in qualitative study (Creswell, 2013). In the research, field notes were involved.

d. Documents

Documents were gathered to give or complete additional information for the researcher, like students' writing routine business documents, such as letters, emails, and memos, and projects, including reports, proposals, ads, and leaflets.

5. *Technique of Data Analysis*

According to Creswell (2007: 148), data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. In this qualitative research, the researcher did the observation and gathered the data from audio-visuals, documents, and questionnaires. The researcher, after that, made an interpretation of the situation that was to find the strategies to foster students' autonomy in writing.

D. Findings and Discussion

1. *Findings*

The findings of this research showed the students' positive perception on applying online web and blog. From the questionnaires, it showed that 46 out of 58 students stated that their responsibility toward their own learning increased in writing. They also mentioned that they did not have any major problems dealing with online web, blog and other writing tasks. They thought that they were more responsible for their own learning. The results of this research proved that incorporating Computer-Assisted Language Learning tools, including web and blog in the process of learning succeeded to support language learners in promoting their autonomy. Besides that, learner-centered approach was covered to build and develop students' autonomy

when they were encouraged to solve their own learning problem in the class or outside of the class. So, researcher concluded that CALL and learner-centered approach could be used in fostering students' autonomy in writing, particularly in English for Written Business Communication (EWBC).

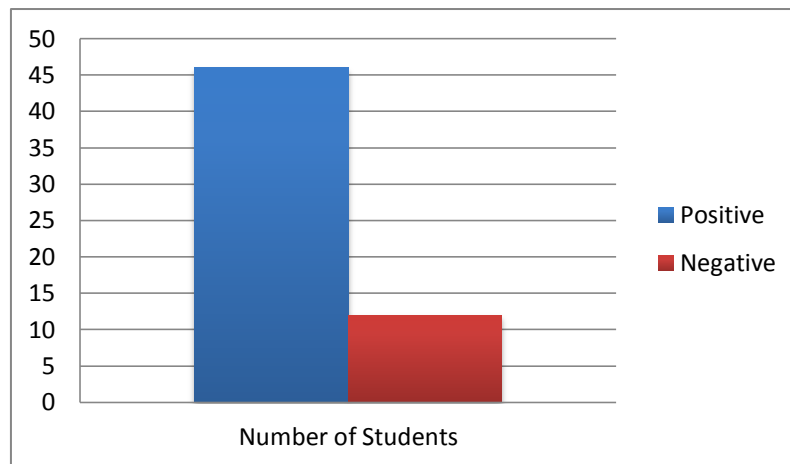


Figure 1. Chart of Students' Perception toward Autonomy in Writing

2. Discussion

As in the class there were 58 students of International Business and Management Program, in order to manage the time efficiently each of them had to present in the front for 5 to 7 minutes and be assessed using teacher's rubric. Here, each student was required to present online Curriculum Vitae (CV) using website <https://branded.me/> before the mid-term test and online web, store or blog using Weebly.com after the mid-term test.

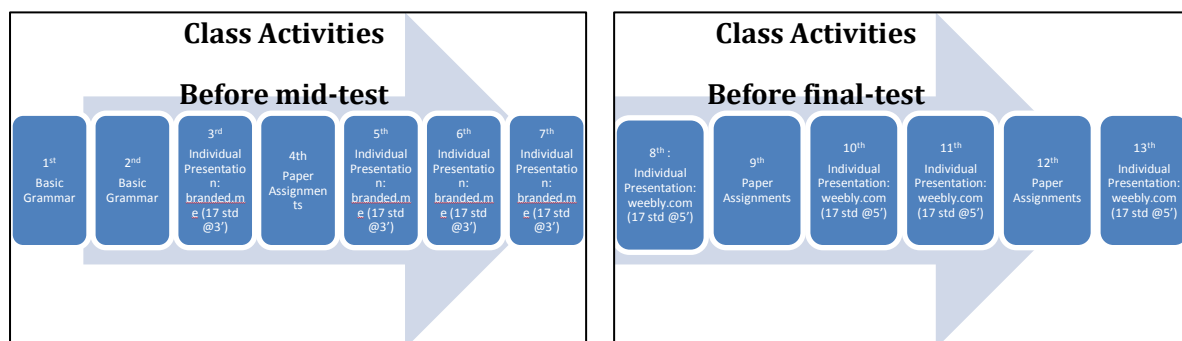


Figure 2. Students' Results of Activities

Since these online tools assist language learners to look for their own materials and correct their sentences by their own efforts. Therefore, it is believed that language learner have the capacity to gradually narrow their dependency to their teacher or their peers, and consequently find themselves responsible for their own learning. As mentioned earlier, students in this study enjoyed the process of sending and receiving writings from their peers. Moreover, online web and blog encouraged them to continue exchanging their writings even at home where no teacher could control and force them to learn. This shows that they have relatively reached to the ultimate goal of education that makes students motivated enough in learning to control their own learning.

Next, the teacher also applied learner-centered teaching in the writing course. Learner-centered teaching was carried out through group discussion, presentation and language awareness activities. Here, most sessions in the course were face-to-face sessions which were complemented by an e-learning platform to support offline teaching. The sessions actually would give the students the opportunity to use online tools in doing and enhancing their presentation and project independently. The projects that they had to do in the groups were leaflets and brochures. They were given freedom to design them based on their own creativity. Thus, by encouraging learner-centered approach, the students would be able to exercise their

responsible for their own learning and determine the direction of their own learning. At the end, it promoted their autonomy toward their study.

6. Conclusion

Based on the finding and discussion above, it could be concluded that building and developing learners' autonomy in writing is crucial. Therefore, the strategies to foster learners' autonomy are required to be known by ESL lecturers. There are two strategies to promote students' autonomy. Firstly, the use of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is capable of making education more empowering for the individual learners. In this matter, the learners can take active role in what they learn as well as how and when they learn it. Secondly, learner-centered teaching in English for Written Communication (EWBC) course will be helpful in solving any problems they find in their learning process.

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